EU[redacted]
REGIS[redacted]

EVENING 41,725
SUNDAY 41,710

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Today's Famine or Tomorrow's Fear?

For three weeks now, things have been pretty quiet along the border between Hong Kong and Red China. The tide of refugees, which reached the greatest proportion since the Japanese invasion of 1941, has apparently been stemmed. But questions remain. Why did so many choose to cross last May? And why were they permitted to cross? What is the extent of the reported famine inside Red China? Answers to these questions must be somewhat fuzzy, owing partly to a lack of communication between American observers and sources inside China. Save for whatever intelligence we get out of China through organizations like the CIA, we are limited to the reports of foreigners whose governments do maintain relations with the mainland government.

One such foreigner is Richard Hughes, Far East correspondent for the Sunday Times of London. He has written about "The Bitter Rice of Red China" in the New York Times Magazine. The Hong Kong refugee, he asserts, is not about to die. He is not suffering, in that sense, from a real famine. The majority was neither starving nor seriously undernourished. Many, however, did show signs of vitamin deficiency. Some showed eye and skin ailments that could be traced to improper diet.

There are, however, unconfirmed reports, and they make sense, that the really starving could not make the trip. After all, it required strength and stamina to make the long walk. Some, the refugees said, dropped out of the line and died along the way.

Mr. Hughes also says that strict food rationing inside China has staved off real famine.

He thinks the reason for the flight to Hong Kong was less today's famine than it was fear of tomorrow's famine. The mainland Chinese have no confidence in their currency, no confidence in the ability of their government to meet the crisis. Young people fear deportation to strange places where they would have to do work they don't want to do. One youth who made it to Hong Kong said he had had no fears about being caught. If he were caught, he said, the worst that could happen would be assignment to a commune. And if he didn't try to escape, he'd be assigned to a commune anyhow.

Mr. Hughes thinks the fears of the Chinese are well taken. Even with imports of grain, China may not be able to make it. Three years of drought have parched the Kwangtung area. Now disastrous floods are ravishing it. There is a shortage of seed. "Get rice quick" methods have ruined the land. Farms are not permitted to lie fallow. Land is sowed too closely, plowed too deeply, irrigated too intensely. This spells trouble for the future.

A human tragedy is being played out in China. But Mr. Hughes doesn't think it is of much political significance. The refugees who came to Hong Kong were "anti-government," but not particularly anti-Communist. They came seeking jobs and security more than they came to escape communism, he says. And none seemed much concerned about Chiang Kai-shek. Not a single refugee, he says, asked to be sent to Formosa.

So it's a dismal story, dismal for those who are hungry now, dismal for those who will be hungry next year, and dismal for those who have hopes that China someday may be free, self-sufficient and no longer possessed of a fancied reason to go to war.